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LIZ LEWIS

# LAST YEAR MY golden retriever was impaled by a porcupine, bit by a snake, and then sprayed by a skunk.

It seemed like every other week I was rushing her off to the vet or dashing to the Internet for advice. During that time, I was forced to learn a lot about those and other ways a hunting dog can endanger its life or become just plain miserable. With upland bird hunting season now under way, it makes sense for all hunters using dogs to know how to prevent, avoid, and tend to potential threats to our canine companions.

## PORCUPINES

My dog took roughly 20 quills in her face, lips, and even inside her mouth. I removed the quills with a needle-nosed pliers. When finished, I gave her a dish of water, which she refused, despite seeming terribly thirsty after the ordeal. Puzzled, I again felt along her face and then in her mouth. There, on the roof, was one tiny quill nub. I carefully extracted it, and she lapped up the water.

My find shouldn't have been surprising. A porcupine is equipped with 15,000 to 30,000 quills, which it erects when threatened. The quills can't be "thrown," so if you or your dog don't get close, you can't be quilled. Rather, the quills are released when touched, penetrating fur and skin. The ends are covered in tiny sharp scales that make the quills difficult to extract.

If it's just a few quills, you can pull them yourself with a hemostat or pliers, says

Gerald Buchholz, a veterinarian in Bismarck, North Dakota, who has treated hundreds of hunting dogs. You may have heard you need to cut the quills first to "reduce air pressure," but Buchholz says that's a myth.

A dog stuck with multiple quills—some vets see animals with hundreds—will be in intense pain, so take it to the vet to be sedated before the painful quill removal. If you can get to the vet within a day or two, there is little chance of long-term damage. But if you wait longer, the quills can get infected and will have to be removed surgically.

## SHARP THINGS

Montana uplands are covered in cactus, burrs, barbed wire, and other items that can cut or poke a dog. If your dog is limping, check for cactus spines and burrs, which can be pulled from the pad with fingers, pliers, or tweezers. If the dog continues to limp, soak the foot in warm Epsom salt water and search carefully for tiny spines.

If you often hunt in prickly spots, consider buying or making dog boots. Several are on the market in rubber, Cordura, neoprene, or other tough fabrics. Some hunters make their own with 5-inch sections of bicycle inner tubes. They look goofy but work well. Wrap the foot in self-adhesive sports wrap to prevent chafing, and then duct tape the tubing onto the wrap, leaving an inch extending past the dog's toenails.

If you hunt abandoned farmsteads and other areas littered with barbed wire, old farm implements, and other sharp objects, consider fitting your dog with a chest and

tummy protector, available from some hunting supply stores.

## TRAPS AND SNARES

Traps set for coyotes, bobcats, and raccoons sometimes also catch pointers, retrievers, and spaniels. Though trappers usually avoid setting snares and traps in areas used by upland hunters, they have the same legal right to use public lands as hunters do, so beware.

If your dog gets its paw caught in a foothold trap, restrain the dog (a jacket over its head works well) and stand with one foot on each side of the trap to depress the springs. That will open the jaws and release the paw.

If your dog gets caught in a snare, you must act quickly or it could suffocate. Restrain the dog to prevent the loop from tightening further around its neck. Then relax the snare enough so you can enlarge the loop by backing out the cable through the locking device. Another option, but only if you carry lineman's pliers or cable cutters, is to quickly cut the cable off the dog's neck.

Large square conibear traps, designed to snap shut around the neck and quickly suffocate an animal, can be extremely difficult to open, though not impossible. (The complicated procedure requires more space than available here. Those who want to learn how to open a conibear trap should call an FWP office and ask for the "Recreationist's Guide to Releasing Traps and Snares" brochure.)

# 911 How to keep your hound out of harm's way this upland hunting season

BY TOM DICKSON

**OUCH! NOW WHAT?** Knowing what to do after your dog has been quilled by a porcupine can make the difference between temporary pain and permanent tissue damage.



**PRICKLY PAW** Sand burrs, cactus spines, and other sharp objects can bring a dog up lame. Some hunters use booties to protect their dog's pads from sharp objects.

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Prevent your dog from getting trapped or snared by avoiding areas used by trappers. If you hunt private land, ask the landowner if anyone is trapping, the types of traps being used, and what areas you should avoid. If you hunt public land, look for signs of trappers. Footholds and snares are usually set on game trails running through thick grass or brush or up small side drainages. Conibears are often used in water, but in upland areas they may be set near natural holes or in boxes or buckets containing bait.

## RATTLESNAKES

The good news is that most snakebites in Montana are not fatal to dogs, says Manuel Garcia, a Helena veterinarian. Montana's one poisonous snake, the prairie rattlesnake, is the smallest of the rattlers and usually doesn't inject all of its venom when it bites.

The bad news is that rattlesnake bites often cause severe pain and tissue damage.

Dogs usually take a snakebite in the face, when they lunge at the reptile. Bite severity depends on the snake's size, where the dog was bitten, and the amount of venom injected, says Garcia, who has treated several dozen dogs for snakebite over the years.

There are many types of snakebite kits on the market. Garcia recommends leaving them there. The best tool for a snakebite, he and other vets say, is a car or truck key.

"Drive your dog to the vet as soon as possible," Garcia advises. "We like to see them no later than two hours after the bite."

That doesn't mean you should race back to the vehicle, however. Minimizing movement reduces the spread of venom, so keep your dog calm and walk back at a steady pace. If possible, call your vet's office and let them know you're coming.

Many home snakebite remedies either don't work or worsen conditions, says Garcia. Applying ice to the bite constricts blood vessels and can cause tissue death. Same with applying a tourniquet. And cutting your dog with a razor and trying to suck out the venom only causes additional damage and pain to your pet.

Some vets say you should give your dog Benadryl or other antihistamines. Garcia, however, doesn't recommend it. "Just get

Vomiting, a rapidly swollen face or limb, wobbly walking, limping, and seizures can indicate snakebite.



KEVIN TATE

the dog to a vet," he advises.

A few other tips I've learned: Early in the season, when cold-blooded reptiles are more likely to be out in the warm sun, avoid areas known to hold snakes. Or only hunt early in the day before the ground warms up and the snakes become active.

You likely won't see your dog get bitten, so keep an eye out for symptoms. Vomiting, wobbly walking, limping, and seizures can indicate snakebite (as well as other ailments), but the best clue is a rapidly swelling face or limb, which usually occurs within 20 minutes of the bite.

Also, keep in mind that nonpoisonous snakes may bite your dog, though to no ill effect. The one that bit my golden retriever was a big bull snake. This aggressive species hisses and shakes its tail, which in dry grass sounds like a rattle.

My dog was puzzled but unharmed, which is how I left the snake.

## SKUNKS

Contact with a skunk isn't life threatening (unless a rabid skunk bites your dog), but the smell can condemn your companion to the backyard for weeks. After my dog took a direct hit in the muzzle, I went on-line and found this anti-stench recipe, developed by a chemist. It worked incredibly well. When I finished, she still had the faintest whiff of skunk, but it disappeared after an hour or two. The recipe:

- 1 fresh quart 3% hydrogen peroxide (available in all grocery stores)
- ¼ c. baking soda (like Arm & Hammer)
- 1 t. liquid dish soap

Mix in bucket (it will fizz). Immediately work solution into affected fur. Keep out of eyes, nose, and mouth by using a sponge to dab around the face. Let stand 10 minutes. Rinse thoroughly with warm water. Repeat if necessary. Do not store solution in an airtight container, because it will explode. (Buchholz says this is why the chemist was never able to sell his formula commercially.)

You can also buy anti-stench products, such as Skunk-off, but I can't see how they could work better than this inexpensive home formula.

Other things worth knowing: If your dog has been sprayed, keep it off dog beds, car seats, or other fabric-covered surfaces that will absorb the oily skunk spray. Sometimes you can trim hair that has been sprayed and not have to wash the dog. If the dog is sprayed in the eyes, you may want to see your vet for soothing eye drops.

By the way, save the tomato juice for drinking. It is useless for removing the stink of skunk spray.

## HEAT EXHAUSTION AND DEHYDRATION

In eastern Montana, especially early in the hunting season, dogs can easily overheat. Symptoms include staggering, excessive drooling, and the inability to stand. Cool your dog down as quickly as possible. Douse it in cool water and get it into an air-conditioned vehicle and then into a lake, river, stream, or stock dam.

"But be careful not to plunge an overheated dog into an icy stream or river, which can cause hypothermia," says Buchholz.

To keep your dog from dehydrating, carry plenty of fresh water in the vehicle and into the field. I store a gallon jug in the car and tote a 1-quart water bottle in the back of my hunting vest. Some hunters spray water from bottles into their dog's mouth, but I carry a small plastic or collapsible bowl to reduce water waste.

You'll know your dog needs water when it starts panting nonstop or shows diminished vigor. Ideally, you'll keep provide water regularly so these symptoms don't

occur. Find a shady spot where your dog can rest and drink calmly.

**PICKUP BED**

“I hold my breath every time I see a dog loose in the back of a pickup,” says Buchholz. “We see way too many accidents because of this, and most are severe—multiple fractures and, too often, death.”

Some hunters don't have room in the cab or don't want a muddy dog in their vehicle. They should bring a kennel and secure it in the pickup bed. That keeps their dog safe and the vehicle interior clean. As for me, I can't imagine driving home after a bird hunt without the sound of my dogs, dirty or not, snoring in the back seat. 🐾

**MONTANA M\*A\*S\*H** Be prepared to perform emergency first aid on your dog when afield. A lightweight fishing forceps works well for pulling cactus spines, burrs, and porcupine quills. Duct tape and sports wrap (above right) combine to make an emergency foot pad protector. Right: Keep your best friend safe and healthy, and you'll have more time to hunt this season and in the future.



CHUCK AND GALE ROBBINS



LIZ LEWIS



**POOCH PACK**

Carry a soft-sided first aid kit in your hunting vest or a fanny pack. It should contain needle-nosed pliers, adhesive tape, small scissors (for trimming burrs from fur or around a gash), antibiotic ophthalmic ointment (without cortisone) to reduce eye redness and irritation, buffered aspirin (though not Tylenol or other acetaminophens) to ease aches, butterfly bandages and sutures (in case your dog gets a big gash), and this article or another guide to field dog safety. In the vehicle, make sure you have the phone number of a local vet or animal hospital, hydrogen peroxide to disinfect wounds, and duct tape.